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A Communist Plot to Kill the Pope — Or a Liar's Fantasy

By Michael Dobbs

ROME — As a witness to the revolution that Pope John Paul II unleashed in the minds of his fellow Poles, I am especially eager to know whether the conspiracy against his life can ultimately be traced back to the Kremlin.

When the pope was shot in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981, I was living in Poland, absorbed in the amazing story of what amounted to a peaceful uprising against 35 years of communist rule. I saw the enormous role played by the first Polish pope in history in reviving the nation's self-confidence and acting as a kind of spiritual godfather to the independent Solidarity trade union.

When John Paul II was shot, Poland palpably shuddered. It was as if a light in the national psyche had flickered and almost died. When it became clear he would live, the light came on again.

When allegations first surfaced of a possible "Bulgarian connection" to Mehmet Ali Agca, the pope's Turkish assailant, the hypothesis of a Kremlin-inspired conspiracy seemed plausible to me. I had no difficulty accepting the proposition that, if Moscow's most loyal ally in Eastern Europe was implicated in this affair, then so too was the Soviet Union itself.

By last June, after an Italian state prosecutor formally accused the Soviet bloc of attempting to murder the pontiff, I had moved from East to West Europe. The Washington Post assigned me to the story. Looking into Agca's background, I traced his footsteps to St. Peter's Square by way of Turkey, Bulgaria and Italy. I talked to his former associates and alleged co-conspirators, interviewed lawyers and magistrates and sifted through thousands of pages of Italian and Turkish legal documents.

I was following a real-life detective story. I discovered that there is a circumstantial case to support the theory of a "Bulgarian connection," but it hangs on the statements of Mehmet Ali Agca, a confessed liar who continued telling demonstrable lies to the Italian authorities even as he "confessed" the Bulgarian connection. There is also a cir-

cumstantial case against the theory of a Bulgarian tie to the attempted assassination. Given the potential political significance of this legal case, both possibilities deserve further exploration.

One of the attractions of the Soviet bloc conspiracy theory is that it seems to provide an easily understandable motive for the murder of a pope. It is difficult to underestimate the fright the

Kremlin received in 1980-81 with the rise of Solidarity. Once the genie of democracy had been allowed to escape in Poland, Moscow's alternatives were stark. Either the genie had to be stuffed back into its bottle or it would devour the country's monolithic communist institutions, thus threatening the stability of all of Eastern Europe.

Why not simply remove the man who was at once a symbol of Poland's national identity and a source of inspiration for millions of discontented Polish workers and farmers? And why not use the Bulgarian secret service, *Darzavna Sigurnost* (DS) — an agency unfraid to commit murder, and which the KGB supervises closely — to accomplish this objective?

From Moscow's perspective, Agca could easily have been the ideal choice as papal assassin. With the exception of a six-week stay in Bulgaria in the summer of 1980, there is nothing in his background to suggest a Soviet bloc connection. In Turkey, he was associated with an extreme right-wing terrorist group known as the Gray Wolves.

Arrested on suspicion of murdering a liberal Turkish newspaper editor in February 1979, he managed to escape from prison in Istanbul with the help of fellow right-wing terrorists.

In fact, it is possible to demonstrate a clear chain of relationships connecting Agca and the Bulgarian secret service — and thus, by extension, the KGB. The Gray Wolves were connected at several different levels with an international gang of smugglers known as the Turkish mafia upon whom they relied for arms and funds. The mafia in turn conducted much of its business through Bulgaria — with the complicity of that country's communist authorities.

The biggest, most striking flaw in the argument for a "Bulgarian connection" to the papal assassination attempt is the personality of the man upon whose "confessions" the whole case hangs: Mehmet Ali Agca himself. It is hard in fact to imagine a more unreliable informant than this 26-year-old convicted killer and proven perjurer.

Agca can be shown to have lied literally hundreds of times to judges both in his native Turkey and in Italy. During two years of interrogations by Italian magistrates, he changed the details of his story virtually continuously. He has admitted describing meetings that never took place attended by

characters invented off the top of his head. He has also acknowledged that he made up non-existent incidents about the three Bulgarian officials in Rome and a member of the Turkish mafia whom he has depicted as his principal accomplices.

When questioned by Judge Martella about obvious lies and contradictions in his previous testimony, court records show that Agca gave differing explanations. His excuses range from temporary memory lapse to a desire to give greater credibility to his accusations against the Bulgarians to a wish to protect his Gray Wolf associates to the sheer psychological difficulty of telling the truth for someone so accustomed to lying. On each occasion, he invariably promised to cooperate unreservedly with the Italian justice authorities in the future, but he kept on lying.

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A second major flaw in the "Bulgarian connection", as described by Agca, is the carefree incompetence with which the Bulgarian agents are alleged to have acted. Granted, secret services have been known to suffer from overconfidence and behave in strange ways. It could be argued that, if the CIA could seriously consider attempting to discredit Cuba's Fidel Castro by making his beard fall out, then there is nothing far-fetched about the Bulgarian DS conspiring with a bunch of right-wing Turks to kill the pope. The problem with this particular plot, however, is that the plotters seem to have taken practically no precautions at all to keep what they were up to secret.

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